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**Tipping Point: What caused Fallujah's Security Transformation**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Tipping Point: What caused Fallujah's Security Transformation?

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**Thesis:** No singular event, or single person, was responsible for the security transformation in Fallujah, Iraq. Instead, a collection of the right individuals applied the right tactics, at the right time. Instead of a singular event providing the proverbial, "straw that broke the camel's back", the data supports the conclusion that five factors made the difference. These factors - changes to the ISF leadership, tribal involvement on the peninsula, additional surge forces, Operation Alljah, and a consistent CF position - came together to achieve success, offering hope for a better life for the people of Fallujah. Without these actions, the security situation would have continued to be unstable and mired in violence.

**Discussion:** Fallujah's security transformation from a state of chaos to relative security occurred after years of bloodshed. What caused this transformation was not a singular event, but instead a combination five factors. Changes to the leadership of the Iraqi Security Forces in late 2006 began the transformation. For too long, the wrong leaders with selfish motives dominated Fallujah within the Ministry of the Interior (MOI - IP) and Ministry of Defense (MOD- IA). The newly motivated army and police pursued enemy forces in and around the city, while tribal leaders played a supporting role in the surrounding area with devastating effects against Al Qaeda. In May of 2007, with key Iraqi leaders in place, Coalition Forces (CF) segmented the city into precincts, which forced close coordination with ISF and CF, and focused the efforts on the center of gravity, the people of Fallujah. The addition of surge battalions linked to the deserts surrounding the city ensured the insurgents' capitulation. The elements of success, which eluded the city for so long, were poised like no time before.

**Conclusion:** The initial hypothesis for the transformation solely credited change in Fallujah to the Awakening (tribal revolt against Al Qaeda), which had roots in Ramadi. Further research shows this to be an incorrect hypothesis; although it had a heavy influence, it was not a key to the transformation. Instead, during multiple interviews with leaders who were there at the time show that it was the Iraqi leadership, the correct "people on the bus" as Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, would say, coupled with surge forces, Operation Alljah, and a consistent and persistent coalition message that fomented change.

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*"Today, Anbar is no longer lost to al Qaeda – it is al Qaeda that lost Anbar. Iraqis – like countless other Muslims across the world – witnessed al Qaeda's brutality first-hand and rejected it. As a result, Anbar has been transformed and reclaimed by the Iraqi people. This achievement is a credit to the courage of our troops, the Iraqi Security Forces, and the brave tribes and other civilians from Anbar who worked alongside them."*<sup>1</sup>

-President George W. Bush

## Introduction

A tipping point, as described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point, How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, is comprised of three elements: contagiousness, the fact that little impulses can lead to large effects, and the fact that dramatic change happens in a short relative period. Once they take hold, change becomes inevitable. Following years of violence, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, dramatically transformed from chaos to stability in only a matter of months. The point of this paper is to determine what caused the security situation in one city in the province, Fallujah, to “tip” towards stability. This paper will argue that it was not a singular event, or a single person. Instead, a collection of the right and individuals applied the right tactics, at the right time. Without these actions, the security situation would have continued to be unstable and mired in violence.

There were many dramatic changes in Iraq following the end of major combat operations in 2003. Attacks against Coalition Forces (CF) began to rise to levels that caused many political pundits and elected leaders to say that all was lost in Iraq. Even when there were signs of success and glimmers of hope, somehow they never transitioned to widespread change. The feeling of Senator Chuck Schumer captured the sentiment of many:

*“...Mr. President, we've heard about successes in the past. They're temporary. They're not based on any permanent structural change or any permanent change in the views of*

*Iraqi citizens. We've heard about success in Baghdad and we've heard about success in Fallujah and they vanish like the wind.”<sup>2</sup>*

During the bleak years following 2004, coalition forces (CF) continued to fight an omnipresent force that appeared to be gaining momentum in Al Anbar with each CF or Iraqi Security Force (ISF) service member killed. In 2005, the situation in Al Qaim became desperate for the tribes and they openly revolted against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), sparking the first break between the tribally supported national insurgents and AQI.<sup>3</sup> Although resistance was successful in the western reaches of the province, the success was not exported elsewhere.

In 2006, there emerged a second glimmer of hope in Ramadi. Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha (Sheikh Sattar), a middle level leader, became the paramount figure responsible for emergence of change.<sup>4</sup> His influence moved others to openly resist the terror caused by AQI and enlightened those who would be followers. In a matter of months in early 2007, attacks against CF in Ramadi decreased exponentially, and a new era of cooperation between CF and Iraqi leadership emerged. Results were felt almost immediately through the region. Within the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), which operationally controlled all of Al Anbar Province, attacks against CF went from an average of 300-400 a week in early 2007, to virtually zero by the spring of 2007.<sup>5</sup> This dramatic transformation was referred to as the Awakening. Since there are other areas that use similar terminology, the Awakening in Ramadi is referred to with a capital “A”.<sup>6</sup>

The effects of the Awakening in Ramadi differed across the province. Many tribes agreed to band together under the Awakening umbrella (Sahwa) to fight AQI. Many others chose to fight independently, although influenced by the anti-AQI activities

elsewhere. In Fallujah, success against AQI in Ramadi encouraged the largest tribe (Albu Issa) to fight AQI, but not underneath the leadership of Sheikh Sattar.

### **Background**

Fallujah was never a hospitable place for the CF, either during major combat operations or in the months following their cessation. In early March 2003, the 82nd Airborne was charged with controlling the city. Soon after the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne assumed control of the area of operations (AO), conditions began to deteriorate rather quickly. In fact, according to a statement by MajGen John F. Kelley after talking with tribal leaders, the roots of the insurgency began in April of 2003 when US Soldiers “gunned down” 77 people in Fallujah and never apologized or admitted that they had done something wrong.<sup>7</sup> Major General Charles Swannack, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division at the time of the incident, did not seem to grasp the paradox associated with the fact that sometimes, “the more force is used, the less effective it is.”<sup>8</sup> General Swannack is quoted as saying, “This is war...We’re going to use a sledgehammer to crush a walnut.”<sup>9</sup> Conflicting accounts of this story exist, but the negative consequences of the event were immediately obvious.

When the Marine Corps conducted a transition of authority (TOA) with the 82nd Airborne in March 2004, they too became mired in violence that gripped the city. Soon thereafter, four Blackwater contractors were murdered as they attempted to transit the city and their bodies were desecrated and hung off bridge spans over the Euphrates River. The United States’ political leadership ordered an offensive against the city, much to the dismay of the Marine leadership. Against their better judgment and after ensuring that

their concerns were conveyed through the chain-of-command, the Marines moved against the city.<sup>10</sup> They were within days of clearing the city when the offensive was called off by the highest levels of political office.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, reporters had worked their way into the city and erroneously reported that hundreds of women, children, and elderly were being killed by the offensive.<sup>12</sup> These reports infuriated the Sunni population, and also began to incite the Shia population. Concerns of a general uprising throughout the country became so severe that leaders at the highest levels ordered a halt to offensive action in Fallujah.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the reasons for this change of course, it suggested that the insurgents were victorious since the Marines were the ones leaving the battlefield; perception was greater than reality.

This scenario gave rise to increased tensions and violence, which ultimately led to the second offensive in November of 2004, Operation Al Fajr (New Dawn). This time, the rules were different. Marines killed thousands of insurgents as they swept through the city. Upon the conclusion of hostilities, Fallujans began to move back into their homes, only to witness firsthand the devastation wrought by the battle. Although the United States paid reparations to each returning citizen, it was far too little. Not to be dismayed, the local citizens attempted to begin life once more. In the months following the second battle for Fallujah, however, the city began incrementally to move back towards instability. As the security situation worsened, the CF, the ISF, and the elected leadership struggled to restore security, but soon lost control once again.

Marines and the ISF continued to fight for control from the end of Operation Al Fajr until early 2007, when something interrupted the course of violence. In order to

determine the factors that caused the “tip” towards stability, it is important to rule out other factors that have been hypothesized, but in reality were not part of the solution.

## **Influencing Factors**

### ***Violence***

To many analysts, the resistance of AQI by the Iraqi tribes in Fallujah and the rest of Al Anbar resulted from increasing levels of violence waged upon the citizens of Al Anbar. The people had just had enough of the violence and chaos, according to this interpretation, and decided to seek change. Although these violent actions would seem to be factors, it is doubtful that they were powerful enough to elicit change. As John McCary stated in a recent article concerning the Awakening,

“Al Anbar has a long and checkered history of violence that predates the arrival of Al Qaeda, so the idea that moral outrage at the brutality of Al Qaeda’s tactics provoked the rebellion is not plausible.”<sup>14</sup>

McCary’s argument concedes that Western ideology regarding violence is much different from the ideology of those who live in countries such as Iraq. Where murder and intimidation are at odds with western fundamental norms, many non-western states see these actions as merely a part of the world in which they live. Colonel William Mullen, former commanding officer of 2d Battalion, 6th Marines (2/6), disagrees with McCary’s position based on discussions he had with the Iraqi people in 2007. In an interview with the author, he stated that the people were exhausted with the brutality.<sup>15</sup> While its mercurial impact is open for debate, it does not appear that increased levels of violence were a deciding factor in the open revolt against AQI.

### ***“The Awakening” (Capital A)***

Colonel Gary Montgomery, Marine Corps Historian, has stated, “According to the Anbaris, the Albu Mahal tribe in al-Qaim initiated the first coordinated resistance in 2005 when they engaged in open warfare against AQI throughout the spring and summer.”<sup>16</sup> Although these early embers of resistance were successful, they were centralized around only one tribal area and therefore not exported elsewhere. Nevertheless, tribes in other parts of Al Anbar did take notice of the effort.<sup>17</sup>

The Awakening, which most observers consider to be the birth of province-wide resistance to AQI, officially began in September 2006, with roots in Ramadi. Sheikh Sattar is largely credited with leading the second AQI resistance effort. Sheikh Sattar’s motives were not altruistic. They are best explained by a comment from LtCol Kurtis Wheeler, another Marine Corps Historian, following his research on the Awakening:

“Tribes and tribal leaders and sheikhs are all guided by self interest. Not selfish, necessarily, but self interest...It is the nature of Arab tribes that sheikhs are concerned about the interests of their people.”<sup>18</sup>

This cultural phenomenon, in combination with the deaths of Sheikh Sattar’s father and three of his brothers, as well as AQI’s infringement upon his business dealings, fueled Sheikh Sattar’s open revolt.<sup>19</sup> Eleven tribes united against AQI in Ramadi, which began to have impacts in other parts of the province. Soon, Awakening movements were burgeoning not only in Al Anbar, but also throughout the country.

In Fallujah, the tribes were taking notice of the Ramadi transformation.<sup>20</sup> Sheikh Sattar did have a relationship with Sheikh Aifan Sadun al-Issawi (Sheikh Aifan), the nephew of the Fallujah paramount sheikh, Sheikh Khamis Hasnawi al-Issawi (Sheikh Khamis) and Sheikh Sattar did contact Sheikh Aifan in 2006 to discuss open resistance to

AQI.<sup>21</sup> He may have influenced Sheikh Aifan to fight, but not as a part of the official Sahwa Awakening movement. This relationship will be discussed further in the tribal section.

### ***City Government***

Fallujah had more than its share of problems with city elected officials, particularly at the mayoral position. Mayors of the city seemed to fall into one of two categories: those who were murdered, and those who fled to a foreign country. It was therefore difficult to attract anyone to the job. This continual cycle of change hindered efforts in the city to establish a legitimate legislative body. Due to ineffective mayors, many CF leadership began to work directly with the council members who shouldered the burden of legislating.<sup>22</sup> Although this approach delivered some short-term successes, it unfortunately also led to the deaths of several members of the council.<sup>23</sup> The lack of leadership at the mayor's office reached a critical point to the Marine leadership of 1/24, which worked through their direct support Civil Affair Group detachment to launch a campaign that resulted in the removal of the mayor in early 2007.

The new mayor, Sheikh Sami, was not an effective leader, and served merely as a figurehead of the city council and allowed others to do the "heavy lifting".<sup>24</sup> Most important in this particular case was not the man in the mayor's seat, but the removal of the "wrong" man, Mayor Jassim. Unfortunately, Sheikh Sami was seen as a collaborator with the CF and was murdered by in April 2007 by AQI, once again adding to the perilous cycle of Fallujah legislators.<sup>25</sup>

## **Factors**

### ***Background***

One of the difficult aspects associated with this thesis was determining which factors were causal, and which were supporting. During many hours of interviews and research, it became apparent that the billet, month, and year of service in Fallujah influenced each leader's opinion tremendously. The sum of the evidence, nevertheless, indicates that five factors were more than supporting elements. Without them, the transformation may not have occurred, or it would have been delayed by months or years.

A confluence of changes made the security situation ripe for a "tip" in favor of stability in the city and surrounding area. It appears that the transformation began in late 2006 when the first of five variables of change emerged. First, after years of corruption, changes to the leadership of in the ISF (IA and IP) finally occurred, placing the "right" leaders in command.<sup>26</sup> Second, buy-in from the paramount sheikh through continuous and persistent engagement provided a previously misunderstood catalyst for change. Third, the addition of two battalions to RCT-6 in spring of 2007 via the Surge, and fourth, the implementation of Operation Alljah in May of the same year also proved vital. Fifth and finally, the consistent CF message presented by all of the forces operating in and around the city allowed units on the ground in the spring of 2007 to take advantage of the situation.<sup>27</sup> These five factors, in aggregate, provided an opportunity for lasting change. It was analogous to a cryptex, where each dial has to be aligned in the correct place to open the device, but if one is out of place, vinegar is released, and the parchment is destroyed. As the leadership aligned, Fallujans were about to see their best opportunity to wrest control of the city from AQI.

## **(1) Iraqi Security Forces**

### ***Iraqi Army***

For too long, the IA was a force mired in corruption. Unit leaders consistently stole from their men in order to pad their coffers. They maintained lists of “shadow soldiers” who existed on the official pay logs, but never bothered to come to work. Anecdotal evidence indicated that some officers offered half-pay to subordinates who would stay at home instead of working, with the other half going into the pockets of the leadership. In addition, forces were poorly trained and had difficulty fighting experienced fighters from AQI. The combination of corruption and poor training left the IA at a huge disadvantage, especially in the volatile city of Fallujah. Something had to change.

The change came in the form of a new leader for the 2nd Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Iraqi Army in December of 2006 after the former commander, Brigadier General Khalid Juad Khadim abruptly left when corruption surfaced charges in the media.<sup>28</sup> Colonel Ali, the new commander, began his term by attacking internal corruption. Instead of padding his pockets with money, he sent money back to the Army when he received pay overages.<sup>29</sup> In conjunction with cleaning-up the image of the IA, he understood the importance of working with the other security forces in the area, especially with other Iraqi forces. He mandated joint IA and IP posts at all combat outposts and worked closely with the leadership of both the IA and elected officials.<sup>30</sup> In addition, he did something that was foreign up to this point. Instead of staying in his CP and rarely venturing to see his men as was the method of operation for previous commanders, Colonel Ali visited his soldiers on posts and stayed there for extended periods of time in order to gain better situational

awareness.<sup>31</sup> The positive effect of this action was felt across the brigade and inspired them to new heights.

Colonel Ali was able to ease sectarian tensions by driving the IA from their forward operating bases, which forced the IA and IP to work together towards a common goal. A key indicator of a security force's readiness to take responsibility for the area of operations is the realization of both the IA and the IP that they have complimentary skills. When aggregated, these skills provide a synergistic effect. It appears that Colonel Ali understood this critical point.

Not all is positive when discussing the role of the IA in Fallujah following Colonel Ali's assumption of command. Although there was a marked improvement in the IA's actions, they still caused significant problems (e.g., accusations of theft) to the CF, the citizens, and the IP.<sup>32</sup> Most of the problems can be attributed to their secular make-up, which differed from the Sunni population of Fallujah. As the IP became more capable and were better prepared to handle the situation in the city, the IA finally left the city for good, which appears to have been a positive step for all parties.

### ***Iraqi Police***

The IP had a checkered past in Fallujah. For years, Americans assumed that they were part of the insurgency, helping their comrades fight and kill CF and ISF personnel; in many cases, they were. Many of the US battalions who worked in the city had a palpable disdain for the IP. As AQI gained tighter control of the city in 2006, the IP ceased to exist as an effective force. Those who resisted AQI either were killed or had harm done to their families. Iraqi Police leadership was virtually non-existent during

these difficult times for a number of reasons. Poor performance, corruption, “shadow police” (those who were on the official logbooks, but did not come to work), and ineffective mentoring, were but a few.<sup>33</sup> The Multi-National Force Iraq commander, General William Casey, had coined 2006 as the year of the IP, but instead the IP in Fallujah proved themselves both corrupt and ineffective.<sup>34</sup> As in the IA, the IP implemented a leadership change in January of 2007 at a critical juncture in the city’s history. Colonel Faisel Ismail Hassan al-Zubai (Colonel Faisel), directly appointed by the MOI, assumed command of the IP from its ineffective former commander.<sup>35</sup> As with Colonel Ali with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, Colonel Faisel became the leader who was sorely needed during this tumultuous time. What is even more remarkable is the past of this new IP leader. More than one American leader interviewed stated that Colonel Faisel was a former leader within the 1920 Revolutionary Brigade, a nationalist insurgent group that had first fought against CF occupation, but later turned its focus towards AQI.<sup>36</sup> Colonel Faisel’s brother had been killed recently by AQI, which seems to have enraged him.<sup>37</sup>

Up to the time of his arrival, the IP were fearful of even wearing uniforms without fully covering their faces for fear of retaliation from AQI. If they were to conduct any operations, they were only at night, and even then, infrequently.<sup>38</sup> On most days they were satisfied with hiding within the confines of the IP stations.<sup>39</sup> Colonel Faisel knew that in order for his forces to become effective, he needed to get them out amongst the population during the day so that they could establish themselves as the trusted protectors of the Fallujah citizens.<sup>40</sup> He drew additional forces from three sources: former nationalist insurgents, recruits directed to join by the tribes, and ordinary citizens who

needed work.<sup>41</sup> As the months passed, it was apparent that the IP were doing more within the city, and their status was rising amongst the population.<sup>42</sup> Colonel Faisal's actions reestablished the IP as a legitimate security force in the city at a time when leadership was the key missing ingredient for success.

### *Iraqi Combined Operations*

Former operations officers from CF units recount that the advent of combined operations through the nesting of the two forces of the ISF was a key indicator of security momentum. During the early part of 1/25's deployment, a number of combined CF and ISF large-scale operations were conducted, at the request of CF leadership, against numerous targets throughout the city.<sup>43</sup> These large-scale operations set a standard for the ISF to follow. During many of these CF sponsored operations, joint IP, IA, and CF planning took place. As stated by the Regimental Combat Team-5 Commanding Officer, Colonel Lawrence Nicholson, "it was quite a sight to see Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army, [and] Marine planners hovering over a map, looking at intelligence, looking at names, [and] comparing notes."<sup>44</sup> During these operations, a large number of the targets were engaged using ISF intelligence, not only CF intelligence.<sup>45</sup> These large-scale operations soon transitioned from CF-led, to CF-supported. On at least six different occasions during 1/25's deployment, a CF company provided cordon forces for an ISF led operation. These operations were planned and executed largely by the ISF themselves. The last machination was the sole ISF led and executed operations, which began in early 2007 following the installation of new leadership in the IA and IP.<sup>46</sup> This type of action

personifies the natural growth of forces towards independence and proved to the Fallujans that their security force was capable of retaking control of the city.

## **(2) Tribal**

Although Fallujah is only 35 miles from Ramadi geographically, the two cities have stark differences that set them far apart ideologically. They had different political affiliations, and tribal allegiance was weaker in Fallujah than in Ramadi. In both cases, though, the tribal ties commanded the primary allegiance of the citizens. The tribal members saw themselves first and foremost as members of the tribe. In this type of social system, the sheikh wielded the most power. To illustrate this point, as was stated in a recent article by John McCary,

“...it was the Sunni Tribal Sheiks, not the general populace, who decided that Al Qaeda’s goals no longer coincided with the best interests of their people.”<sup>47</sup>

In Fallujah, the Albu Issa and the Albu Alwan tribal leaders began to stabilize their own areas following the Awakening (capital A).<sup>48</sup> The biggest tribe, and most influential in the Fallujah area, was the Albu Issa tribe. Led by Paramount Sheikh Khamis and his nephew Sheikh Aifan, they were responsible for the important area surrounding Fallujah. Sheikh Khamis’ elevated age relegated him to more of an advisory role, while Sheikh Aifan took on an operational responsibility. A number of the people interviewed did not believe that Sheikh Sattar influenced the tribal elements in Fallujah. Bill Ardolino, an embedded reporter who worked with multiple battalions in Fallujah during 2007, states differently that there was not only an influence, but also an informal relationship between Sheikhs Sattar and Aifan.<sup>49</sup> During the early part of the Awakening in Ramadi, Sheikh Sattar and Sheikh Aifan did openly discuss resistance to AQI, and Sheikh Aifan

borrowed some of Sheikh Sattar's security forces to fight AQI in the Fallujah area early in the fight.<sup>50</sup> After a number of meetings, it is apparent that Sheikh Sattar also asked Sheikh Aifan to join the Awakening (capital A). Because Sheikh Sattar's Abu Risha tribe centered in Ramadi was much less prominent compared to the Albu Issa tribe in Fallujah, the Albu Issa tribe declined.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Sheikh Khamis commented that Sheikh Sattar should follow him, and not the other way around.<sup>52</sup> The tactics of the Awakening (capital A) were however followed by Sheikhs Khamis and Aifan, and Sheikh Sattar's success in the Ramadi area most likely encouraged them to move forward in Fallujah.<sup>53</sup>

During this integral time in Fallujah's history, Sheikhs Khamis and Aifan provided the tribal leadership that was necessary to begin actions against AQI, organizing open resistance and influencing tribal members to join the ISF. As Sheikhs Khamis and Aifan began their anti-AQI campaign in the surrounding desert and villages, Colonels Faisal and Ali focused on the city and its entry points.

### *Al Qaeda in Iraq Missteps*

There is little doubt that AQI hurt themselves during the years leading up to the transformation. The annals of history will be filled with documents highlighting what "not to do" to get the population to side with your cause. Among those elements was the indiscriminant killing of fellow Muslims, especially women and children. During the summer of 2006, Fallujah saw a change in insurgent Improvised Explosive Device (IED) tactics. Nationalist insurgent groups would place IEDs in areas that offered some standoff from neighborhoods. These placements were usually along main supply routes or alternate supply routes, but were rarely if ever seen in the neighborhoods or adjacent to

open fields where children would frequently congregate to play. Al Qaeda, however, began to place IEDs specifically in these areas, which killed and wounded many children. It appears AQI saw these victims as an acceptable byproduct of attacks against both CF and ISF. Another critical mistake was the killing of the paramount sheikh of the Albu Fahd tribe, Sheikh Nasr Abdul Karim al-Maklif.<sup>54</sup> He was killed in the summer of 2006 after returning from a meeting between the US Ambassador Zalman Khalilzad and other tribal sheikhs, who met to discuss ways to stop the violence in the province.<sup>55</sup> In Iraqi culture, there are some people who are considered untouchable. Paramount sheikhs are at the top of this list. The murder of Sheikh Nasr proved to many Iraqis that AQI and their ideology were not in keeping with their own tribal ethics.<sup>56</sup>

The strict adherence to Sharia Law also seems to have caused consternation amongst the Iraqi people. For example, in Fallujah, AQI banned cigarette smoking in public in November 2006, which ran contrary to the desires of the average Fallujan.<sup>57</sup> To add to the discontent, AQI also arranged marriages between their people and local women.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the most egregious misstep was AQI's infringement on the financial dealings of the tribes.<sup>59</sup> The sheikhs had been the power brokers in the region for hundreds, if not thousands of years. When AQI marginalized the sheikhs and began to take control of some of their moneymaking means, the sheikhs' allegiance tipped towards the CF. At one point, the alliance between nationalist insurgent groups and AQI resulted primarily from hatred for a common foe. This early "marriage of convenience" fell apart as the AQI ideology clashed with nationalist feelings.<sup>60</sup>

### **(3) The Surge**

In a recent article titled, “Do Surges Work”, Colonel Mark Cancian makes a compelling argument that surges are effective because they show that the CF is serious about its commitment, and they push troops into areas previously not occupied by CF troops.<sup>61</sup> The initial surge force in Al Anbar arrived in October 2006. This surge force, the 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), was split into multiple elements and sent throughout Al Anbar.<sup>62</sup> Two rifle companies from the MEU were sent to Ramadi to reinforce the efforts of a US Army brigade, and the rest of the MEU was spread west and south throughout the MEF AO.<sup>63</sup> In an attempt to determine if they had any impact on Fallujah, one could easily conclude that they did not because they were never in the city itself. Additional evidence supports this position; neither the personnel on the ground, nor any of the sheikhs credited the surge as a key factor in removing AQI from the region.<sup>64</sup> To illustrate the point further, one of the architects of the surge, Frederick Kagan, stated that these additional forces were not conducting large-scale actions prior to June 30, 2007, a time well after changes had already begun to take effect in Fallujah.<sup>65</sup> With the compelling argument against the official surge, one could easily summate that the surge was not a factor. This position would be incorrect. What these arguments fail to understand was discussed in Colonel Cancian’s article; surges put troops into previously unoccupied territory.

During an interview with Brigadier General (BGen) Simcock, then commanding officer of Regimental Combat Team 6 (RCT-6), he stated clearly that the surge was a causal factor for the security shift.<sup>66</sup> In late Spring 2007, two surge battalions were attached to the RCT. These units were placed in problem areas surrounding Fallujah, of

which the most notorious was the town of Zaidon.<sup>67</sup> These areas had previously served as staging areas and sanctuaries for insurgents planning attacks on cities like Fallujah. By moving CF into these areas and occupying them initially with battalion-sized elements, the CF denied the insurgents an area to operate freely.<sup>68</sup> This action pushed the insurgents further and further from the city, making it exponentially more difficult for attack the city.

#### **(4) Operation Alljah**

A recent article about the changing tide in Fallujah written by Colonel Mullen in the Small Wars Journal discusses two factors that he believes led to the achievement of security in Fallujah (see Appendix A for unit timelines). These two factors were the segmenting of the city into small, manageable precincts, and the banning of civilian vehicle traffic in the city. There is not a consensus amongst American leaders as to whether they were causal factors, or merely contributing ones. Although arguments for both sides are compelling, there is clear and convincing evidence that these two tactics were causal factors in the tip.

There is an old adage that the only way to eat an elephant is piece by piece. The leadership of 2/6 understood this well. Upon arriving in Fallujah for their second deployment to the same city within two years, they implemented a tactic that had first seen tremendous success in Ramadi.<sup>69</sup> Known as Operation Alljah, it segmented Fallujah into 10 precincts.<sup>70<sup>71</sup></sup> The intent of this operation was to coordinate a number of actions that until this point were mutually exclusive.<sup>72</sup> The most compelling aspect of this plan was the CF leadership's focus on the center of gravity, the citizens of Fallujah,

not on the enemy.<sup>73</sup> As the Marines developed close relationships with the security forces in these precincts, the second order effect was greater amounts of accurate intelligence. This intelligence allowed the Marines and ISF to thwart a number of attacks, but most importantly led to the discovery of a SVBIED just prior to detonation.<sup>74</sup> This type of success is contagious (one element of tipping points), and leads to better coordination and cooperation among all people desiring stability.

A counterpoint to establishing precincts has been offered by some who question whether it was necessary, especially given the dynamics on the ground at that time. More than one person interviewed was of the opinion that moving CF back into the city was a step backwards since the IP were now becoming a force that could operate independently. In early 2007, CF forces moved their permanent base located at the center of the city to the outskirts because of the improving security cooperation between different elements of the ISF and their increasing capability to target AQI alone. In essence, when the CF moved back into the city, they reversed a course of action that many felt was leading to a state of independence. Brigadier General Simcock clearly stated that the situation on the ground necessitated this new tactic, a point also reinforced by Colonel Mullen.<sup>75</sup> Although this counterpoint has merit, there is little doubt that at the early stages of ISF and tribal coordination, a number of high profile attacks could have derailed the transformation significantly. Operation Alljah virtually eliminated that concern.

Suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) were a serious issue in Fallujah in 2006, and influenced the actions of many turret gunners, both those assigned to operate daily in the city, and those who merely transited the city. In May of that year, a black BMW approached too close to a CF convoy. The vehicle gained the

attention of the turret gunner, but before he could react, the vehicle detonated and he was mortally wounded. A similar incident occurred during the summer when a SVBIED crossed the median and struck a CF High-Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle traveling in the opposite direction. Fortunately, there were no serious CF casualties. Understandably, SVBIEDs caused heightened tensions, which led to increased numbers of escalation of force (EOF) incidents that resulted in the injury and deaths of some citizens.

Escalation of force is the broad term describing the technique CF use to determine the intent of drivers operating in close proximity. As vehicles approached CF patrols, CF first used a series of flags, hand gestures, pyrotechnics, and other non-lethal measures to gain the attention of the driver in an attempt to de-escalate the situation by determining if the driver had hostile intent. If these actions failed to positively influence the driver's actions, then a series of kinetic measures were used. First, warning shots were fired in a safe direction. If these warning shots did not alter the driver's course, then a series of shots were fired at the vehicle and eventually targeted at the driver, disabling the threat. In an ideal scenario, all of these actions would follow a logical course from non-lethal to lethal. The difficulties are exponentially more difficult when operating in a city where the CF vehicles and civilian vehicles operate in close proximity. In some cases, it is necessary to skip all non-kinetic de-escalation steps and move directly to lethal shots. This is never ideal, but sometimes necessary when the SVBIED threat-level is elevated. There is no doubt that these incidents injured the relationship between the citizens of Fallujah and the CF.

Operation Alljah was aided by a city-wide ban on non-commercial vehicles following a large vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on a funeral

party that resulted in the deaths of dozens of citizens in May 2007. The mayor, with heavy influence from Colonel Faisel, was responsible for the ban.<sup>76</sup> This action took away an important AQI tactic, SVBIEDs, and greatly assisted the CF and ISF with maintaining security as it prevented thousands of vehicles from moving freely through the city. No longer did CF convoys or patrols have to worry about civilian vehicle movement. Up to the attack on the funeral party, there was no hope that the Fallujah leadership would support a ban on vehicles in the city, which would have greatly reduced the number of EOF incidents. One could easily argue that the only reason this was done at this time was the leadership changes in the IP and MOI.

## **(5) Coalition Forces**

Much has been written concerning the importance of leadership in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. As Dr. Mark Moyar stated to the author, leaders are said to *get it*, “if they recognize that counterinsurgency requires extensive use of non-military instruments of power in order to gain the support of the people.”<sup>77</sup> This understanding allows them to apply the requisite amount of soft and hard skills required to further the effort. In many Marine cases, it is understood that each short seven-month deployment will not in itself achieve overall mission accomplishment. Instead, the mission of each unit is to “move the ball towards the end zone” so that it eventually leads to a touchdown.<sup>78</sup> In the author’s opinion, the Marine Corps has done a good job of preparing leaders at all levels to conduct COIN operations. Although nuanced differences always are aplenty, there appears to have been a consistent and constant message conveyed by the CF to the Iraqi leadership throughout both the good and bad

times in Al Anbar. Even when Marines and Soldiers were being killed and wounded during these bad times between 2004 and late 2006, the Marines were still engaging and implementing projects to help the people of Al Anbar.<sup>79</sup> Many Iraqi leaders appear to think highly of the Marines for this professionalism during these difficult times.<sup>80</sup> Strong Marine leadership had to align with the correct Iraqi leadership in order to begin the arduous process of change. As Jim Collins wrote in his book, *Good to Great*, you need to get the right people on the bus.<sup>81</sup> The CF leaders occupied only a minority of seats on the bus.

### ***Coalition Force Missteps***

In Fallujah, many opportunities were lost, and missteps led to false conclusions and confusion on both sides. The consequences of the missteps cannot be easily calculated, but one can argue that the biggest result was wasted time and effort. It has been argued that the Marine Corps did not fully understand the tribal culture and many examples could be cited. During 1/25's deployment in mid 2006, the Marines worked with supposed tribal leaders in both the Fallujah City Council and the Fallujah Security Council. Many of these people were not tribal leaders, but instead were tribal representatives.<sup>82</sup> The true leaders were in Jordan or other areas waiting for the security situation to stabilize before their return, not because they were fearful of AQI, but because their tribes had asked them to move out of the area for their own safety.<sup>83</sup> During Fallujah Security Council meetings, the tribal representatives could not make decisions without discussing the matter with their real sheikh.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, proposals that

were discussed at these meetings were never implemented in a timely manner.<sup>85</sup> Only when the sheikhs were convinced to return did this problem rectify itself.

Culturally, the CF failed to understand that the tribe provided the leadership and the social safety net for the tribesman. By not including the sheikh in all matters concerning his tribe and tribal area, the CF was cutting him from his traditional role and truly undermining his authority. Coalition commanders also failed to understand simple economics from the tribal perspective. Many Civil Affairs Group (CAG) officers and commanders attempted to implement the western style of awarding contracts. Not until late 2006 did most understand that awarding contracts directly to a bidder without the involvement of the sheikh runs counter to traditional Iraqi culture, where the sheikh has a role in all contractual dealings within his tribal area.<sup>86</sup> Without the traditional method of operations, the sheikhs lost some control over both their people and the areas that they presided over.<sup>87</sup> While the CF leadership engaged tribal leaders and in many instances demanded that the sheikhs control both their tribes and their areas of responsibility, the CF was undermining the sheikh's authority by not including them in the reparation process that was taking place throughout the area of operations.<sup>88</sup> Only with a better understanding of the culture and the way that the sheikh fit into the equation did the CF gain the support of the sheikhs.

## **Conclusion**

The initial hypothesis that the Awakening in Ramadi was responsible for the security transformation in Fallujah is far from reality. Instead of a singular event providing the proverbial, "straw that broke the camel's back", the data supports the

conclusion that five factors made the difference. These factors - changes to the ISF leadership, tribal involvement on the peninsula, additional surge forces, Operation Alljah, and a consistent CF position - came together to achieve success, offering hope for a better life for the people of Fallujah. The dramatic security transformation seemed almost an impossibility to not only US elected officials and political pundits, but to many service members who had served during the tumultuous periods between 2004 and 2007. The American perception was that eventually conditions would improve, but not for a long time.<sup>89</sup> As dutifully described in the Malcolm Gladwell's book, dramatic change can happen in a short period. Coalition Forces were there to take advantage of the changes; the results speak for themselves.

## Appendix A

### Unit Rotation Timeline

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Arrival</u>	<u>Departure</u>	<u>Commander</u>
2d Battalion, 6th Marines	Sep 2005	Apr 2006	LtCol Aikan
1st Battalion, 25th Marines	Apr 2006	Oct 2006	LtCol Landro
1st Battalion, 24th Marines	Oct 2006	Mar 2007	LtCol Van Opdorp
2d Battalion, 6th Marines	Mar 2007	Oct 2007	LtCol Mullen

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Statement released by the White House on 01 September 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Remarks on the Senate floor on 06 September 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 235.
- <sup>4</sup> Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II – Iraqi Perspectives*, (*Quantico: Marine Corps University*), 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I – American Perspectives*, (*Quantico: Marine Corps University*), 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Expressed by Mr. James Soriano, Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader, Department of State.
- <sup>7</sup> *Al Anbar Awakening, Volume I*, 242.
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM3-24 or MCWP 3-33.5, (Washington, D.C., December 2006), 1-27.
- <sup>9</sup> Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, (New York, Osprey Publishing, 2008), 243.
- <sup>10</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 51.
- <sup>11</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 51.
- <sup>12</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 52.
- <sup>13</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 52.
- <sup>14</sup> John A. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives”, *The Washington Quarterly* 32 no.1 (January 2009), 47.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Col Mullen.
- <sup>16</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 12.
- <sup>17</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 13.
- <sup>18</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 15.
- <sup>19</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 155.
- <sup>20</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino
- <sup>21</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 92.
- <sup>22</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>23</sup> Email interview with Capt Brezler.
- <sup>24</sup> Email interview with LtCol Van Opdorp and Capt Brezler.
- <sup>25</sup> Email interview with Capt Brezler.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview comments from both BGen Simcock and LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview comments from both BGen Simcock and Col Mullen.
- <sup>28</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Col Mullen.
- <sup>33</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>34</sup> Speech by General Casey during LtGen Odierno’s Corps change-of-command.
- <sup>35</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview comments from both Col Mullen and LtCol Van Opdorp .
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>38</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>39</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>40</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>41</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>42</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino
- <sup>43</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>44</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 13.
- <sup>45</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.

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- <sup>47</sup> McCary, 46.
- <sup>48</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 156.
- <sup>49</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>50</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>51</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview with LtCol Van Opdorp.
- <sup>53</sup> Email interview with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>54</sup> McCary, 47.
- <sup>55</sup> McCary, 47.
- <sup>56</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 12.
- <sup>57</sup> Interview with LtCol VanOpdorp.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview with Col Mullen.
- <sup>59</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 10.
- <sup>60</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume II*, 10.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with MGen Neller.
- <sup>62</sup> Cancian, 14.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with MGen Neller.
- <sup>64</sup> McCary, 52.
- <sup>65</sup> McCary, 52.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with BGen Simcock.
- <sup>67</sup> Interview with BGen Simcock.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview with BGen Simcock.
- <sup>69</sup> William F. Mullen, “Turning Fallujah”, *Small Wars Journal* (29 October 2009), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/10/turning-fallujah/> (accessed 01 December 2009), 5.
- <sup>70</sup> Mullen, 5.
- <sup>71</sup> Interview with Col Mullen.
- <sup>72</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>73</sup> Interview with Col Mullen.
- <sup>74</sup> Email with Bill Ardolino.
- <sup>75</sup> Interview with BGen Simcock.
- <sup>76</sup> Mullen, 5.
- <sup>77</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, IX.
- <sup>78</sup> Comment to author by Dr. Mark Moyar.
- <sup>79</sup> Col Nicholson comment to 1/25 leadership.
- <sup>80</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 16.
- <sup>81</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishing), 41.
- <sup>82</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>83</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 245.
- <sup>84</sup> Interview with Col Mullen and email from Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>85</sup> Email interview with Maj Schaffer.
- <sup>86</sup> McCary, 50.
- <sup>87</sup> McCary, 50.
- <sup>88</sup> *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 230.

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